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Making Chicago Work, Three Decades From Now

ByTOMHUNDLEY

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Daniel Burnham's book Plan of Chicago laid out a plan for the development of the Chicago metropolitan region in 1908. The Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Flanning has presented Go to 2040 which recommends actions for future development of the Chicago region.

John Konstantaras/Chicago News Cooperative

As the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning sees it, Chicago in 2040 will no longer be battling its suburban neighbors for growth and prosperity opportunities. Instead, the city will be part of a super region competing with areas like China and Brazil. Two million more people will probably be crammed into the Chicago region, and the city may be served by a new, huge transportation hub in the West Loop with high-speed trains and other new transportation ideas.

If all goes according to the agency's new "Go To 2040" plan, the Chicago area 30 years from now has a much different look and feel. But much of the plan's momentum and vision might seem familiar, thanks in large part to Daniel Burnham, Chicago's original uber-planner.

His influence is on display, both in the strategy the planning agency has put together for the city's future, and literally in the shrine-like glass display case in the agency's office reception area, which holds a well-thumbed and slightly faded copy of Mr. Burnham's 101-year-old "Plan of Chicago."

"When you think about planning in the city of Chicago, you can't ignore Daniel Burnham's shadow," said Randall Blankenhorn, CMAP's executive director.

Mr. Burnham was the architect who designed some of Chicago's earliest skyscrapers and oversaw the construction of the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition. But his greatest contribution to Chicago may have been the 1909 plan that gave the city its broad boulevards, its miles of lakeshore park and an enduring sense that Chicago is still destined for great things.

"The main legacy of the Burnham plan is that it got people to believe in the idea of planning itself," said Carl Smith, an urban history scholar at Northwestern University. "It convinced them that you can intervene in history and remake a city."

The planning agency is inviting public comments on the 404-page draft through Aug. 6, and the formal launch is scheduled for October.



"Go To 2040" and the Burnham plan share a common pedigree — both were created at the behest of the Commercial Club of Chicago, an invitation-only conclave of the city's business leaders.

In 1996 the club set up a group called Chicago Metropolis 2020, which in 1999 published a plan so elegant it was sold as a coffee-table book. One of its recommendations was the establishment of a regional planning agency. Acting on that suggestion, the Illinois legislature created CMAP.

The planning agency's 2040 draft envisions Chicago as the hub of an integrated region that, in order to prosper, will need to add 2 million people and a million jobs over the next 30 years.

That is the view of many experts who foresee a 21st century global economy that revolves around a dozen or so mega-regions spread across Asia, Europe and the Americas. Mr. Blankenhorn said his job is to make sure the Chicago area is one of those regions.

"It's no longer Chicago against Joliet and Waukegan and Elgin," he said. "It's us against India and China and Brazil."

The architects of the 2040 plan also share Mr. Burnham's belief that Chicago's principal purpose is to serve as a transportation hub.

One of the plan's key proposals incorporates Union Station into a new West Loop Transportation Center, an underground complex that would run beneath Clinton Street between Lake Street and the Eisenhower Expressway. The center would serve as a hub for commuter trains, the El, bus lines and a long-dreamed-of intercity high-speed rail network.

The plan also emphasizes that the movement of freight is what links Chicago to the global economy. But with government studies indicating that the already massive volume of freight handled by Chicago is likely to increase by 60 to 70 percent over the next 30 years, the 2040 plan focuses on modest transportation upgrades that aim simply to keep congestion at today's barely tolerable levels.

"It's unrealistic to think that congestion will go away," said Mr. Blankenhorn, the former Bureau Chief of Urban Project Planning at the Illinois Department of Transportation.

In recent decades, regional planning has been driven — often to its detriment — by federally financed transportation projects.

"It became a competition for transportation dollars," said Tom Cuculich, director of planning and development for DuPage County. "Whoever hired the best lobbyists got their project."

Mr. Cuculich, who has been involved in the planning agency's project from the start, said the new plan attempts to reverse this logic. Instead of allowing the eagerness for federally funded transportation projects to shape planning priorities, the emphasis is placed on land-use considerations, conservation, green technology and job growth.

"It's a paradigm shift that needed to occur," he said.

Although CMAP does not have authority over zoning and land use — that remains in the hands of local municipalities — the agency is not without influence. It has statutory power to decide which federally funded transportation projects get built.

But Mr. Blankenhorn said the key to implementing the 2040 plan lies not with the disbursement of federal dollars, but in winning over the public.

The Chicago Plan Commission recognized the importance of that a century ago when it hired an indefatigable salesman named Walter Moody to promote the Burnham plan. Mr. Moody went on the lecture circuit with lantern slides — the "power point" equivalent of the times. He papered the city with pamphlets, produced a newsreel that was shown in local theaters and even managed to have the plan incorporated in the civics curriculum of public schools.

But Mr. Burnham's ideas were realized mainly because they had the financial and political backing of the Commercial Club. These days the club no longer carries that kind of clout.

"That's not necessarily a bad thing," Mr. Smith said. "Our society is more open, more democratic, which is good."

In terms of democracy, the Chicago area may get bogged down by too much of a good thing. In addition to 284 individual municipalities, the region encompasses more than 1,400 separate

units of local government, the most of any region in the United States. The New York metropolitan area, by contrast, has fewer than 200.

The tension between city and suburb is often the biggest obstacle that regional planners must overcome. But even as Chicago's suburbs emerge as economic powerhouses in their own right, groups like the Metropolitan Mayors Caucus, founded by Chicago Mayor Richard M. Daley in 1997, have helped foster a spirit of cooperation, according to city and suburban officials

The 2040 plan also revives what might be called the hidden legacy of the Burnham plan. Mr. Burnham cared deeply about living conditions for ordinary citizens, and in his original, 300-page handwritten manuscript he argued for providing day care to the children of the working class and making sure police did their work in a transparent manner. He also wanted the city to be equipped with plenty of public restrooms maintained to a standard of "perfect sweetness."

These recommendations were trimmed from the final version, but according to Mr. Smith, it is clear that Mr. Burnham wanted a city that was not only grand, but also livable.

The new plan makes no mention of restrooms, but it contains chapters devoted to education, nutrition, access to health care, energy conservation and other quality-of-life issues. "Livability" appears to be a main goal.

As the planning agency's staff members ponder the strategies for selling the 2040 plan to the public, they need look no further than the words on the jersey of the CMAP softball team: "What Would Daniel Burnham Do?"

[View with PicLens]























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2 Responses to "Making Chicago Work, Three Decades From Now"

1. ken goldberg says: July 18, 2010 at 3:44 pm

Tom

Now further inspired, will have to read after having also read Devil and The White City, also with strong references to Burnhamand other architects of Chicago's urban plan.

Ken

Reply

2. John McCarron says: July 19, 2010 at 8:51 am

Thanks for this shorty, which makes an important—and many would say "dull" topic—not just approachable, but fun. This is the kind of stuff the dailies ignore ... and an opportunity for CNC to deliver for its "knowledge" audience ... if I can borrow an NYT marketing term

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